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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the use of paraprofessionals at reference desks in a random sample of Ohio public libraries. The assumption underlying this research is that before one can address the effectiveness of reference paraprofessionals, it is necessary to understand the extent to which they are used; the tasks they perform; and the conditions associated with their use. The purpose of this research is to describe the extent to which paraprofessionals are found working at the reference desk. The second emphasis will be to explain why some libraries use reference paraprofessionals more than others by examining library size, hours of operation, workload, and nature of training. The results showed widespread use of reference paraprofessionals: they work in 85% of the libraries surveyed and provide half of the reference service in 58% of the libraries. Their tasks range from basic (directional and instructional) to complex (supervision and collection development). Analysis indicated reliance on paraprofessionals was greatest in small and medium-sized libraries. Included in the appendix is the public library reference survey. (Contains 34 references.) (JLB)

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PARAPROFESSIONALS AT THE REFERENCE DESK  
IN OHIO PUBLIC LIBRARIES

A Master's Research Paper submitted to the  
Kent State University School of Library Science  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree Master of Library Science

by

Grace A. Franklin

November 1990

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## ABSTRACT

A questionnaire mailed to a random sample of Ohio public libraries solicited data on how and why paraprofessionals were used at reference desks. Based on a 70 percent usable return rate, results showed widespread use of reference paraprofessionals: they work in 85 percent of the libraries and provide over half of all reference service hours in 58 percent of the libraries. Their tasks range from basic (directional and instructional) to complex (supervision and collection development). Analysis indicated reliance on paraprofessionals was greatest in small- and medium-sized libraries. Nature of training programs was not related to use.

DEDICATION

To Rip

For unstinting patience and encouragement over two long years--

Many thanks, dear friend

Master's Research Paper by

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B.A., The Ohio State University, 1968

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## PROBLEM STATEMENT

Libraries exist to serve their patrons, and the reference desk is the front line for providing public service. Reference effectiveness is determined by many factors, including communication between patron and librarian, availability of materials in the collection, librarian knowledge of materials in the collection, and librarian workload. Reference performance also depends on which librarian is on the desk at a given time.

Achieving the ideal of providing the best reference service to every patron is threatened by spiraling costs of library operation and the need to manage an ever broadening array of new (and expensive) reference materials and heavier workloads. Reference staffs are overloaded with new tasks without losing any old ones (Miller 1984). Juggling these factors and others to maintain high quality and cost effective reference service is a considerable management challenge.

A perennial topic of discussion in library circles is the use of paraprofessionals to supplement staffing at the reference desk. A great many of the questions presented at the reference desk do not require the skills of a professional librarian with a degree in library science. Estimates of the proportion of questions that are of a directional or ready reference nature range from 70 percent (Heinlen 1976, Woodard 1989) to 80 percent (St. Clair and Aluri 1977, Beckman 1973). One study claims that less than 1 percent of reference queries require in-depth and time-consuming searches (Kok and Pierce 1982). Directional and ready reference questions could be answered by a trained



paraprofessional, thereby freeing the professional librarian to pursue more complex reference questions. While recognizing that patrons' initial questions often do not reflect their true information needs, the library manager must ask if it is cost effective to pay a professional \$30,000 or more a year to answer directional questions.

This paper examines the use of paraprofessionals at reference desks in a random sample of Ohio public libraries. The assumption underlying this research is that before one can address the effectiveness of reference paraprofessionals, it is necessary, first, to understand the extent to which they are used, the tasks they perform, and the conditions associated with their use. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to describe the extent to which paraprofessionals are found working at the reference desk. How many libraries use reference paraprofessionals? What work do they do? How do their assignments compare to those professional librarians? The second emphasis will be to explain why some libraries use reference paraprofessionals more than others by examining library size, hours of operation, workload, and nature of training.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of the use of paraprofessionals in public library reference service was initiated by Bunge (1967a, 1967b) in a dissertation research project that examined the relationship between library education and reference question answering

effectiveness. In his sample of medium-sized Midwest public libraries, he found reference paraprofessionals used in 89% of the libraries (1967a: 1581).

A detailed picture of reference paraprofessionals in academic libraries was presented by Boyer and Theimer (1975). They found extensive reliance on paraprofessionals (69% of the sample). Their descriptions of educational attainment and training provided for paraprofessionals suggest numerous questions worth posing in a public library setting. Their data show a lamentable 80% of the libraries sampled did not have a formal in-service training program for reference paraprofessionals (1975: 197).

Courtois and Goetsch (1984) focused on academic libraries in one state, updating the Boyer study and expanding its design to include types of reference questions handled by paraprofessionals. They found paraprofessionals staffed reference desks in 61% of the libraries, especially during weekend, evening, and off-peak hours when reference service might otherwise have been unavailable. Their stress on the importance of training for reference paraprofessionals constitutes sound management advice: "more benefits might result if libraries focus on the effect that poorly trained nonprofessionals have..." (1975: 391). The soundness of the advice was largely ignored--only two of the 64 academic libraries surveyed had a formalized training program (1984: 389).

Other writers echo the importance of thorough training for reference paraprofessionals (Anderson 1986, Halstead and Neeley 1990, Mugnier 1980, and Woodard 1989). Several describe training programs used successfully in their library systems (Coleman and Margutti 1977, Jensen 1986, Layman and Vandercook 1990, and Westbrook 1989). Components of successful training programs include multiple communication channels (verbal, written, and visual), repetition of the message, practice sessions with "real life" questions, and attention to reference sources and conducting the reference interview.

The most recent treatment of reference paraprofessionals in public libraries is Jahoda and Bonney's (1990) survey of public libraries serving population areas of 90,000 to 100,000. The authors found three-fourths of those public libraries used paraprofessionals for answering reference questions. One-third reported using paraprofessionals at the desk even if no librarian was on duty or available for assistance. Only 40 percent of the paraprofessionals were college graduates, unlike the nearly 80 percent reported in the academic libraries sampled by Courtois and Goetsch (1984: 387). The most prevalent method for training was on-the-job training (OJT); 96 percent of the libraries used OJT either alone or in combination with another training method. Jahoda and Bonney do not explore reasons for use of reference paraprofessionals or the implications of their use.

The issue of paraprofessionals at the reference desk inevitably generates debate about the relative quality of service

provided by paraprofessionals and trained professionals. Researchers have grappled with the issue, comparing the performance in answering questions by the two groups (Bunge 1967b, Halldorsson and Murfin 1977, Murfin and Bunge 1988). The results show some, but not an overwhelming, performance advantage for professional reference librarians using a variety of measures. For example, the "patron success rating" in Murfin and Bunge's sample of 20 academic libraries was 60 percent for professionals versus 50 percent for the reference paraprofessionals (1988: 11). Bunge reported no significant difference in the accuracy with which reference questions were answered by professionally trained librarians and paraprofessionals; he did find that professionals were faster (1967b: 61-62). Direct measurement of question answering ability is beyond the scope of this study, but some light can be shed by using an indirect measure of performance, namely, supervisors' satisfaction with performance.

Performance standards comprise an intriguing component of the literature on reference services. Problematic because they usually do not take local variation into account, standards nonetheless have an almost irresistible appeal because they provide visible and measurable performance goals. Standards are found at both the national and local levels (Ohio Library Association [OLA] 1986, Orgren 1986). Two Ohio standards for public libraries are directly relevant to this study. The first states that libraries should "provide staff trained in reference

work all hours the library is open;" the second says that libraries should "conduct ongoing training for all staff who have some responsibility for providing reference service" (OLA 1986: 16). These two concepts--coverage of the reference desk when the library is open and training for reference staff--are important components of reference service. Results of an OLA survey showed that over a third of the public libraries met the first standard; no data were available on compliance with the training standard (OLA 1986: 16). Has reference desk coverage and training of reference staff changed since the mid-1980s?

The literature review shows that paraprofessionals are widely used in reference service, moreso in public than academic libraries. The nature of most reference queries--directional and factual--is within the question answering capabilities of paraprofessionals. Training is seen as an important means of giving paraprofessionals the skills needed to handle most reference transactions. Probable budget pressures and workload increases in the library of the 1990s suggest the need for reference paraprofessionals will continue. This study examines their use in Ohio public libraries.

## METHODOLOGY

### Design

The unit of analysis in this descriptive study is the reference department (not the individual librarian). The basic approach was to describe the dependent variables (extent of use

of paraprofessionals at the reference desk, type of paraprofessional tasks, and perceived quality of service) and their association with independent variables such as size of library, reference workload, hours of operation, and nature of training. The research hypotheses are:

<1> the use of paraprofessionals (in terms of amount of time worked and independent work shifts) will be higher in small libraries.

<2> the use of paraprofessionals (in terms of amount of time worked and independent work shifts) will be higher in libraries where the reference workload is greater.

<3> the use of paraprofessionals (in terms of amount of time worked and independent work shifts) will be higher in libraries that have the longest reference desk service hours.

<4> the use of paraprofessionals (in terms of amount of time worked and independent work shifts) will be higher in libraries that have more comprehensive training for the paraprofessional staff (i.e., where training is ongoing, covers many aspects of reference service, and is reinforced by written, verbal, and on-the-job methods).

<5> Reference paraprofessionals will be assigned a larger number of tasks and those tasks will be more complex in libraries that have more comprehensive training (i.e., where training is ongoing, covers many aspects of reference service, and is reinforced by written, verbal, and on-the-job methods).

The definition of paraprofessional used in this study is a person who has patron contact and answers reference questions and who does not have a degree in library science (either an M.L.S or a 5th year B.L.S.). This definition is based on the work of Boyer and Theimer (1975) and Bunge (1967b).

### Sample and Data

A random sample of 69 of Ohio's 250 public libraries was drawn using the list of public libraries found in Statistics of Ohio Libraries (1989: 32-37) as the sampling frame. All large libraries (holding over 500,000 volumes) were included in the study. A sample of 30 medium (50,000 to 499,999 volumes) and 30 small libraries (less than 50,000 volumes) were selected using random number assignment.

Data were collected using a questionnaire mailed to heads of reference departments in the sample of libraries. (A copy of the survey document with a summary of responses is attached at APPENDIX A.) The survey was pretested at the Upper Arlington Public Library and with several former reference department heads; none of the pretest subjects was included in the final sample. The survey was designed as a postage paid return-mailer. To improve response rate, one followup mailing was sent.

Unique local library organization meant that not every respondent would be the director of a general reference department. Respondents were asked to identify the type of reference unit that they supervised, using a list of choices that included general reference department, subject area collection, information desk or other local unit (such as adult services or circulation desk) that provided reference service to patrons. This information was requested in order to place survey responses in the context of local organization for reference service.

Addresses and names for mailing the survey were gathered from the American Library Directory 1989-90. The cover letter guaranteed confidentiality of results and anonymity for responding libraries.

## FINDINGS

The discussion is based on usable surveys returned between September 25 and October 20, 1990, from 48 of the 69 libraries (70 percent usable return rate). Some libraries did not answer every question, but all usable data were extracted. The potential for response bias exists with any survey, but a high response rate reduces the possibility of such bias (Babbie says 70 percent or higher is "very good" [1973: 165]). In this survey, return rates were highest for the large libraries (89%) and the medium-sized libraries (87%). The lowest rate of return (50%) was found in the small libraries, suggesting that conclusions drawn from this sample about small libraries may be most subject to the possibility of response bias.

Paraprofessionals are playing a substantial and important role in delivering reference services to the patrons of Ohio's public libraries. By any measure the use of paraprofessionals is widespread: 85 percent of public libraries employ them; among those libraries they make up almost half of the reference workforce; and half of the libraries are heavy users: paraprofessionals work on their own without professional supervision and provide over half of all reference desk hours.



Paraprofessionals' tasks cover a wide span of complexity and difficulty, from providing basic directional information to collection development and supervision--the same tasks that professionals perform. Their formal education--over half have at least a 4 year college degree--is supplemented by local training programs that vary widely in terms of scope of topics addressed and training methods employed.

Analysis indicated that reliance on paraprofessionals was greatest in small- and medium-sized libraries. Respondents reported that the most important reasons for using paraprofessionals were increasing hours of service, saving money, and local labor market conditions.

#### Description

Extent. The many measures summarized in Table 1 demonstrate that paraprofessionals play an important role in delivering reference services in Ohio. Forty-one of the forty-eight libraries responding (85%) use paraprofessionals to provide direct reference service to patrons. (This level is comparable to the 89% reported by Bunge (1967a); it is higher than the 74% reported by Jahoda and Bonney (1990).) This phenomenon is not of recent vintage. Over 70% of the libraries using paraprofessionals have done so for 20 years or more.

Reference paraprofessionals composed just under half (46%) of the total number of reference staff in the libraries that use paraprofessionals. Eight of the libraries rely exclusively on

paraprofessionals for reference service--they have no M.L.S. or B.L.S. reference librarian on their staff.

In terms of time actually worked, the proportion of total reference desk hours provided by paraprofessionals is high. Among the libraries using paraprofessionals, a majority (58%) report that paraprofessionals provide fifty percent or more of the total reference desk service hours.

Table 1.--Profile of public library use of paraprofessionals for reference service

	Percentage of libraries with feature	Number of libraries responding
Paraprofessionals provide direct reference service to patrons	85% (n=41)	48
Only paraprofessionals provide reference service	20% (n=8)	41
Reference paraprofessionals have been used 20 years or longer	72% (n=23)	32
Paraprofessionals provide half or more of all reference hours of service	58% (n=23)	40
Paraprofessionals work independently (not scheduled with professional librarians)	78% (n=32)	41
Paraprofessionals work independently and at least half of all reference hours	53% (n=21)	40

Another way to examine reference desk staffing is to ask whether paraprofessionals are working independently or under supervision--do they work on the desk alone or only when teamed with trained reference librarians? The vast majority (78%) of responding libraries said paraprofessionals work the reference desk on their own. Only 24% report scheduling paraprofessionals only if a professional reference librarian is working at the desk or available on call.

Combining these two measures of paraprofessionals' reference service gives a measure of library reliance on paraprofessionals ranging from light to heavy. In table 2 we see that over half of the libraries--53%--are heavy users: paraprofessionals working alone provide half or more of all reference service hours.

Table 2.--Library reliance on reference paraprofessionals

	Percentage of reference service hours provided by paraprofessionals	
	Less than 50%	50% or more
Paraprofessionals work only with professional librarian (n=9)	18% (n=7)	5% (n=2)
Paraprofessionals work independently (n=31)	25% (n=10)	53% (n=21)
Totals (n=40)	(n=17)	(n=23)

Education. As Table 3 makes clear, a high school degree is the minimal educational level of reference paraprofessionals--only one individual lacked a high school diploma. Over half of the reference paraprofessionals are college graduates; over 12 percent have post-college education. Compared to Jahoda and Bonney's recent national sample (1990), Ohio's reference paraprofessionals are better educated--a higher proportion hold college degrees (53% versus 40% reported by Jahoda and Bonney).

Table 3.--Educational attainment of reference paraprofessionals

Reference Paraprofessionals		
	Percent	Number
No high school degree	0.6%	1
High school graduate	27.8	40
Some college	18.1	26
College degree	41.0	59
Graduate education	12.5	18
	-----	-----
Totals	100.0%	144

Tasks. What kinds of work are paraprofessionals doing at the reference desk? Respondents reported that three basic reference tasks were performed by paraprofessionals in all of the libraries. These basics included answering directional questions (e.g., where is the photocopier?); giving instruction (e.g., how

to use the card catalog or the Readers' Guide); and answering ready reference questions (e.g., what is the population of China?). Table 4 demonstrates clearly, however, that reference paraprofessionals are not limited to performing just these basic tasks. They also perform a range of additional, complex tasks.

Table 4.--Functions performed by reference paraprofessionals

	Percent of Libraries	Number of Libraries (n=41)
Answer directional questions	95%	(39)
Give instructions	95%	(39)
Answer ready reference questions	95%	(39)
Answer extended reference questions	71%	(29)
Participate in collection development	44%	(18)
Compile bibliographies	34%	(14)
Conduct online searches	22%	( 9)
Supervise staff	17%	( 7)

In most libraries, paraprofessionals perform a mix of the "basic" and more complex tasks. Only eight libraries (20 percent) limited paraprofessionals' reference service to the basic three tasks of directing, instructing, and answering ready reference questions. Over one in three (36 percent) used paraprofessionals to provide one or two of the more complex reference tasks listed above, while 44 percent used paraprofessionals to provide at least three of the more complex reference tasks.

Professional reference librarians did reserve some tasks to themselves in some libraries. Collection development was the task most frequently reserved to the professional staff; just over half of the libraries kept collection development in the domain of the professionals. In a third of the libraries, supervision was identified as an activity reserved to professionals. Table 5 summarizes the occurrence of professionally-exercised reference tasks.

Table 5.--Reference functions performed exclusively by professional librarians

	Percent of Libraries	Number of Libraries (n=41)
Collection development	51%	(21)
Supervise reference staff	37%	(15)
Answer extended reference queries	20%	( 8)
Department-wide management & decision-making	17%	( 7)
Conduct online searches	17%	( 7)
Compile bibliographies	15%	( 6)

Overlap obviously exists between the tasks performed by reference professionals and paraprofessionals across libraries. Viewed from a statewide perspective, paraprofessionals are engaged in every aspect of reference service. Professional reference librarians are sharing and delegating even high-level and complex reference tasks to paraprofessionals.

Quality of Service. How well do paraprofessionals perform their responsibilities? The level of supervisor satisfaction with performance is a partial and indirect indication of the quality of service provided. Reference department heads used a five point scale to indicate level of satisfaction with the quality of reference service provided by paraprofessionals. The results in Table 6 indicate that, overall, supervisors are pleased with the quality of paraprofessionals' reference work. Only three supervisors said they were "dissatisfied;" none said they were "very dissatisfied." The three supervisors expressing an "other" opinion said they could not give a single rating because some individuals were very good, while others were less able.

Table 6.--Supervisor satisfaction with paraprofessionals' work

	Percent of Supervisors	Number of Supervisors
Very satisfied	40.0%	16
Satisfied	45.0	18
Dissatisfied	7.5	3
Very Dissatisfied	0.0	0
Other	7.5	3
Total	100.0	34

Respondents' optional comments revealed a positive attitude toward using paraprofessionals; respondents felt the advantages outweighed the drawbacks. A remark volunteered by many was that

paraprofessionals often were as good at reference as the professional staff: ". . . with proper, continuing training, I see no difference between professionals and paraprofessionals."

Other comments included:

"The diverse educational backgrounds of our paraprofessionals provide our reference department with resource people with expertise in different backgrounds"

"There are many less-than-professional tasks of a fetch and carry variety that need to be done in a reference department that can easily be handled by a paraprofessional"

"Paraprofessionals provide insights into the barriers experienced by patrons; librarians are sometimes too indoctrinated to notice such barriers"

"Using paraprofessionals gives us more people to help patrons."

Training. How do reference paraprofessionals learn the skills to carry out their tasks? In more than three fourths of the libraries, training for paraprofessionals is conducted by professional reference librarians. (Some of these libraries supplement the professionals' effort with contributions from paraprofessionals and other library staff.) Training is provided on a continuing, ongoing basis in three-fourths of the libraries.

Training topics span the core of reference work: interacting with patrons, identifying and using reference sources, conducting the reference interview, and making referrals. Libraries' attention to these areas is summarized in Table 7. A third of the libraries incorporated all these topics in their training programs. Another third addressed at least two of the four. The remaining third included only one or none.



Table 7.--Paraprofessional training topics addressed by libraries

	Percent of Libraries	Number of Libraries (n=38)
Use of reference sources	68%	(26)
Interacting with patrons	66%	(25)
Reference interview	47%	(18)
Making referrals	45%	(17)

Techniques for effective training include use of multiple media (verbal, written, and visual modes of communication), repetition, and practice to reinforce new skills. Table 8 shows the frequency with which such techniques were used by the libraries to train reference paraprofessionals.

Table 8.--Libraries' training techniques for paraprofessionals

	Percent of Libraries	Number of Libraries (n=38)
On-the-job training	89%	34
Workshops	55%	21
Manuals	39%	15
Practice sessions	37%	14
Lectures	34%	13
Exercises	29%	11
Videos	24%	9
Tests	11%	4

Employing multiple techniques was not common among the libraries. Only 29% used more than four of the techniques listed in Table 8. Table 9 summarizes libraries' simultaneous use of different training techniques.

Table 9.--Libraries' use of multiple training techniques

Number of Techniques	Percentage of libraries	Number of libraries (n=38)	Cumulative Percentage
8	3%	1	3%
7	8%	3	11%
6	8%	3	19%
5	10%	4	29%
4	8%	3	37%
3	18%	7	55%
2	24%	9	79%
1	21%	8	100%

The picture that emerges from examining libraries' training programs suggests that, on the positive side, training is being conducted by professional reference librarians and that it is, by and large, ongoing. On the negative side, many libraries are not addressing multiple topics of reference service, nor are they using multiple training techniques. Some libraries have designed multi-faceted training programs. Fifteen libraries--over a third of the sample--had local training programs with all of the following characteristics: training by reference librarians plus ongoing training plus training that focuses on two or more

reference topics plus use of three or more communicating techniques.

### Explanation

Respondents' opinions are one source of information about why libraries use paraprofessionals to provide reference service. In rank ordering five factors, respondents cited "maintaining or increasing hours of coverage of the reference desk" as the most important reason for using paraprofessionals. This may reflect efforts to comply with the Ohio Standards of Public Library Service, which encourage libraries to provide reference service whenever the library is open (1986: 16). Ohio libraries are substantially achieving this target--only one library reported fewer hours of reference service than hours of library operation.

"Saving money for the library" received the second highest number of "most important" rankings. Labor market conditions--the supply of applicants--constituted the third most important reason. Several respondents noted that no M.L.S. candidates were to be found in their area, while other libraries said the best qualified candidates had education and experience that the libraries valued above an M.L.S.

Other possible reasons for using paraprofessionals were regarded as relatively unimportant by respondents. These included "relieving stress on professional staff," "reducing pressure during peak demand times," and "allowing professional reference librarians to carry out other tasks."

Research Hypotheses. The research hypotheses introduced on page 7 suggest additional explanations for use of paraprofessionals. Use of paraprofessionals--the dependent variable--was measured in three ways: 1) simple presence or absence of paraprofessionals at the reference desk; 2) independent desk shifts for paraprofessionals (i.e., scheduling paraprofessionals to work alone) versus scheduling them to work with a professional reference librarian either on the desk or on call; and 3) percentage of reference service hours provided by paraprofessionals (less than or more than 50% of total hours).

Data on the independent variables library size, reference workload, and hours of operation were examined for their relationship with use of reference paraprofessionals (Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3). To measure size, libraries were grouped into small, medium and large categories based on the number of volumes held in their collection (libraries holding up to 50,000 volumes were classed as small; medium sized libraries held between 50,000 and 499,999 volumes; large libraries held over 500,000 volumes).

To measure workload, respondents' estimates of the number of patron questions per hour during peak demand times was used. The "peak rate" ranged from 2 to 50 questions per hour; 23 was the average figure. To measure amount of reference desk service, the daily hours of reference desk operation reported by respondents were totalled to yield a weekly total. The hours of reference service per week ranged from 40 to 73; 61 was the average figure.

Size of library was not associated with presence or absence of reference paraprofessionals, but as Table 10 shows, library size was strongly related to scheduling paraprofessionals to work alone at the reference desk. Small and medium sized libraries were most likely to schedule paraprofessionals to work alone while large libraries scheduled paraprofessionals to work with a professional librarian.

Table 10.--Library size and independent desk shifts for paraprofessionals

	Small & medium libraries (<500,000 volumes)		Large libraries (500,000+ volumes)	
	Percent	Number	Percent	Number
Paraprofessionals work with trained professional reference librarians (n=9)	14%	5	67%	4
Paraprofessionals work on their own (n=32)	86%	30	33%	2
Total (n=41)	100%	35	100%	6

Chi square = 8.203; Phi square = .20; P < .01; df = 1

Library size was also associated with proportion of desk hours worked by paraprofessionals (see Table 11). Large libraries used paraprofessionals to provide less than half of all reference

service hours, while in small and medium-sized libraries paraprofessionals were much more likely to work over half of all reference hours.

Table 11.--Library size and hours of service worked by paraprofessionals

	Small & medium libraries (<500,000 volumes)		Large libraries (500,000+ volumes)	
	Percent	Number	Percent	Number
Paraprofessionals work under half of all reference desk hours worked (n=17)	35%	12	83%	5
Paraprofessionals work at least half of all reference desk hours worked (n=23)	65%	22	17%	1
Totals (n=40)	100%	34	100%	6

Chi square = 4.816; Phi square = .12; P < .05; df = 1

None of the crosstabulations exploring hypotheses 2 and 3 revealed even a weak relationship. Each of the three measures of paraprofessional use (the dependent variable) and the independent variables--reference workload and hours of reference service--were analyzed, but no associations were present.

The fourth hypothesis looked for a relationship between features of the libraries' training program and use of

paraprofessionals. (Measurement of the training variables was described on page 18. No attempt was made to prioritize or weight the training techniques.) The frequencies in Table 12 suggest a relationship between the number of topics addressed in training programs (these included attention to interaction with the patron, use of reference sources, conducting the reference interview, and making referrals) and the amount of desk coverage provided by paraprofessionals. The Chi square "goodness of fit" test failed to provide statistical confirmation of this relationship, however (Carpenter 1978:78-87).

Table 12.--Scope of training and hours of service provided by paraprofessionals

	0-2 topics addressed by libraries		3-4 topics addressed by libraries	
	Percent	Number	Percent	Number
Paraprofessionals work under half of all reference desk hours worked (n=14)	64%	7	35%	7
Paraprofessionals work at least half of all reference desk hours worked (n=17)	36%	4	65%	13
Totals (n=31)	100%	11	100%	20
Chi square = 2.349; Phi square = .075; P < .15; df = 1				

The final hypothesis addressed the relationship between tasks performed by paraprofessionals and the nature of the training they received. (Again, no attempt was made to prioritize or weight tasks performed or the training methods employed.) The frequencies in Table 13 suggested a mild association between the number of topics covered in training and the number of jobs paraprofessionals perform. Again, however, the statistical test failed to support the hypothesis.

Table 13.--Scope of training and number of reference tasks performed by paraprofessionals

	0-2 topics addressed by libraries		3-4 topics addressed by libraries	
	Percent	Number	Percent	Number
Up to five tasks performed by paraprofessionals* (n=17)	73%	8	45%	9
Six or more tasks performed by paraprofessionals (n=14)	27%	3	55%	11
Totals (n=31)	100%	11	100%	20

\* the minimum number of tasks in any library was 3  
Chi square = 2.203; Phi square = .071; P < .15; df = 1



In libraries where paraprofessionals' training was ongoing, paraprofessionals performed a larger number of tasks, as the frequencies in Table 14 show. The statistical test reveals modest support for the relationship.

Table 14.--Training frequency and number of reference tasks performed by paraprofessionals

	Libraries with continuous training		Libraries where training is not continuous	
	Percent	Number	Percent	Number
Up to five tasks performed by paraprofessionals* (n=21)	48%	13	75%	8
Six or more tasks performed by paraprofessionals (n=16)	52%	14	25%	2
Totals (n=31)	100%	27	100%	10

\* the minimum number of tasks in any library was 3  
Chi square = 3.016; Phi square = .082; P < .10; df = 1

The purpose of the analysis in this section was to identify factors associated with paraprofessional use. Statistical evidence for library size as an explanatory factor was demonstrated; similar support for the nature of training as an explanatory factor was lacking. The absence of a relationship between training and paraprofessional use probably reflects local library conditions, such as budget constraints, that assume primary, driving force. There was no statistical evidence that

libraries that used more training techniques and covered more topics deployed paraprofessionals differently from libraries using briefer approaches to training. This means that paraprofessionals are being deployed in reference service regardless of the extent of training they receive. That fact has important implications for patrons.

#### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The results of this survey indicate that both by choice and necessity, Ohio's public libraries do not regard reference service as the exclusive domain of professional, degreed librarians. A large number of Ohio's public libraries use reference paraprofessionals in order to extend the hours of reference service available; others use paraprofessionals to stretch budget dollars. The use of reference paraprofessionals among 85 percent of Ohio's public libraries is higher than in academic libraries (61% reported by Courtois and Goetsch 1984) and exceeds the 75% level reported by Jahoda and Bonney (1990) in a national survey focused exclusively on smaller public libraries where one would expect a greater reliance on paraprofessionals.

Arguments about the desirability or necessity of requiring a library school degree for reference work proliferate in library literature, in classrooms, and at lunch tables. Frankly, such arguments usually miss the main point. The fundamental concern ought to be quality of reference service that is provided, not the job title or salary of the person providing the service. The

accuracy, effectiveness, and efficiency with which patron requests are processed are more important than whether the person helping the patron has or doesn't have an M.L.S. or B.L.S.

Future research needs to address the question answering performance of Ohio's reference paraprofessionals. How do they compare to reference librarians with an M.L.S.? What roles do training, general education, and years of service play in determining quality of reference service? The evidence from two previous studies (Bunge 1967b, Halldorsson and Murfin 1977) indicates that skills of the professional are superior, but the margin of superiority is not great. Both studies acknowledge that any individual paraprofessional can excel and surpass any individual professional.

While the debate about the value of the library school degree goes on, one thing no one seems to argue about is that paraprofessionals do need training to do reference work. The present study sheds light on the nature of training provided to reference paraprofessionals. The OLA Standards for Public Library Service state that training for reference staff should be "ongoing;" 75 percent of the libraries are meeting that target. The evidence indicates a wide disparity in the nature of training programs, ranging from minimal preparation (put them on the desk and let them learn on the job) to formalized programs focusing on multiple reference service topics and employing multiple techniques to communicate and reinforce the skills.

This survey examined only the presence or absence of a variety of training features; it did not evaluate content or effectiveness. No relationship was found between extent of training and extent of paraprofessional use--libraries are using reference paraprofessionals with widely varying preparation. The quality of training is another area that would benefit from additional research. What constitutes "good training" for reference paraprofessionals? Common sense and library literature suggest that reference training should address general concepts of reference service (how to deal with the public, how to use basic sources, how to conduct a reference interview, how to make referrals) and should adapt treatment of these topics to the unique features of the local situation (the type of materials in the collection, the type of library, the patrons' expectations, the availability of other resources in the area).

Because paraprofessional use in Ohio is so widespread and because there is no reason to expect reduced use in the future, it is critical that the training provided be the best possible, especially for libraries that are more dependent on paraprofessionals and that have fewer resources to devote to training services. Developing a model training program for reference paraprofessionals is a project that regional library associations and the State Library could coordinate. The Standards for Public Library Service in Ohio do not specify content of training programs for reference staff, but library literature abounds with advice and model programs that could be

adapted for Ohio libraries. Some examples include discussion of staff selection, initial training and ongoing training in Anderson (1986); the in-service workshop at San Diego State University (Coleman and Margutti 1977); the reference assistance program at the University of Connecticut's library (Jensen 1986); the staff development program at the SUNY Albany libraries (Gavryck 1986); and the statewide reference improvement program in California (Layman and Vandercrook 1990). The California example contains innovative suggestions for how the state agency "went to the field" to deliver training in participants' libraries.

Ohio could develop a systematic series of in-service training workshops, manuals, and videos covering principal reference topics and functions and make these available to all public libraries at little or no charge. The assumption implicit in this recommendation is that the quality of reference service will be better as a result of the training. An experimental design of matched pairs of libraries, half of which receive the new training and half of which do not, would offer a method for measuring the effects of training. The impact of training is an empirical question that deserves an answer.

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## APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire was mailed September 25, 1990 to reference department heads at 69 libraries in a random sample of Ohio's public libraries. The survey was professionally reproduced on a single large sheet and tri-folded into booklet form. Designed as a "return-mailer," the completed survey could be folded, stapled, and dropped into the mail (return postage was affixed). A followup was mailed to libraries that had not responded on October 5. Forty-nine surveys were returned by the cut-off date of October 20. The usable return rate was 70 percent.

The questionnaire attached shows frequency distributions for respondents' answers to the survey questions.

Number of libraries  
responding noted in  
margin

## PUBLIC LIBRARY REFERENCE SURVEY

Dear Librarian,

In just a few minutes, you can make an important contribution to knowledge of reference desk staffing:

- <> How much do Ohio public libraries use paraprofessionals to provide reference service to patrons?
- <> What tasks do paraprofessionals perform?
- <> What training do paraprofessionals receive?

This survey is conducted under the sponsorship of Kent State University and is the final requirement for receipt of the Master of Library Science degree. All responses will be treated confidentially. No names of individuals will be collected, nor will the names of libraries be revealed.

The study concentrates on the main library, not on branches. Its focus is the general reference desk at the main library location. (If your library has no general reference desk, substitute the largest subject department; if there are no subject departments, substitute the information desk; if there is no information desk, substitute the most appropriate local department.)

I would be happy to share the tabulated results of the survey with you, or to respond to any questions about the survey. Put your name and address at the bottom of this page to receive survey results.

Please take the time now to complete and return this survey. Your participation is vital. Thank you for your help!

Sincerely,

Grace Franklin  
 614/488-2996

Yes, I want to receive survey results. Please send to:

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# **PUBLIC LIBRARY REFERENCE SURVEY**

## **Instructions**

Please answer the following questions. The term "paraprofessional" is used to indicate individuals who provide assistance to patrons at the reference desk but who do not have a degree in library science (either an MLS or a 5th year BLS).

Your answers should reflect the point of view of the general reference desk at the main library. Exclude branches. If your library has no general reference desk, please substitute the subject department with the largest budget. If your library has no subject departments, substitute the information desk. Failing that, substitute the unit that provides reference service to patrons. Please indicate the type of reference unit for which you are answering:

48

25

2

8

13

- a. general reference department
- b. subject department
- c. information desk
- d. other department (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

\* \* \* \* \*

1. Which of the following statements best describes your library's overall use of paraprofessionals at the reference desk? [Circle only one letter]

7

4

5

11

21

- a. We do not use paraprofessionals at the reference desk. (NOTE: If your answer is "a", please skip to Item # 13)
- b. We schedule paraprofessionals at the reference desk only when a trained professional reference librarian is also working at the desk.
- c. We schedule paraprofessionals to work alone at the desk if a trained professional reference librarian is available "on call" elsewhere in the library.
- d. We schedule paraprofessionals to work alone at the desk during off-peak times.
- e. We schedule paraprofessionals to work alone at the desk during peak times.

Figures below are averages for libraries

using  
paras

2. Please estimate the number of staff working in each category below.

(The numbers in "b" through "d" should add up to the total given in "a." FTE means full time equivalents)

5.4

2.4

3.0

0

- a. Total reference department staff (FTEs)
- b. Professional reference librarians (FTEs)
- c. Paraprofessionals who work at reference desk (FTEs)
- d. Other paraprofessionals in reference department (FTEs whose responsibilities exclude desk duty)

3. Please estimate the percentage of reference service hours provided by paraprofessionals reported above in "2 c."

3	a. under 5 percent
2	b. 5 to 10 percent
8	c. 10 to 25 percent
4	d. 25 to 50 percent
23	e. 50 percent or higher

4. Which of the following tasks are performed by paraprofessionals reported above in "2 c" who work at the reference desk in your library? [Circle all that apply]

39	a. answer directional questions (e.g., where is the photocopier?)
39	b. answer ready reference questions (e.g., what is the population of China?)
39	c. provide instruction (e.g., how to use card catalog or <u>Readers' Guide</u> )
29	d. answer extended reference questions (e.g., how has critical opinion of Edith Wharton's work changed in this century?)
18	e. participate in collection development
9	f. conduct online database searching
14	g. compile bibliographies
7	h. supervise staff
1	i. other (please describe)

-----  
 -----  
 -----

5. Please describe duties that are performed only by professional reference librarians and not by reference paraprofessionals.

22 coll. dev.	-----
7 online search	-----
6 bibliog.	-----
15 supervise	-----
9 other	-----

6. Please describe the educational background of reference paraprofessionals reported above in "2 c." (Entries show the number of paraprofessionals at each educational level.)

1	a. Less than High School degree	-----
40	b. High School degree	-----
26	c. Some college education	-----
59	d. Two year degree	-----
18	e. College degree	-----
	f. Post-college education	-----

7. Please describe the training provided to paraprofessional staff to prepare them for reference work.

[Please circle all the words that apply; underline the single most important training feature]

- 29
- a. <sup>14</sup> training is provided by (reference librarians, reference <sup>12</sup> paraprofessionals, other library <sup>11</sup> employees, trainers outside the library)
- b. training uses (<sup>15</sup> manuals, <sup>9</sup> videocassettes, <sup>13</sup> lectures)
- c. training frequency is (one <sup>2</sup> time, <sup>7</sup> periodic, <sup>27</sup> ongoing, as <sup>14</sup> needed)
- d. training addresses (<sup>18</sup> interacting with <sup>25</sup> patrons, <sup>2</sup> identity <sup>26</sup> & use of sources, conducting reference <sup>1</sup> interview, making referrals)
- e. training occurs (on-the-<sup>34</sup> job, in <sup>21</sup> workshops)
- f. training includes (<sup>11</sup> exercises, practice <sup>14</sup> lessons, test <sup>4</sup> s)
- g. training includes other features [please describe on separate sheet]

8. When did your library first begin to use paraprofessionals at the reference desk? [Supply approximate year]

9 less than 20 years; 23 20 years or more; 9 don't know/no answer

9. What are the reasons your library uses paraprofessionals at the reference desk? [Please rank\_order responses. Let "1" be most important reason]

Figures show number of "most important" rankings

<u>17</u>	-	maintain or increase hours of coverage on desk
<u>1</u>	-	relieve burden, stress on professional staff
<u>0</u>	-	reduce pressures during peak demand times
<u>2</u>	-	allow professional reference librarians to carry out other tasks
<u>11</u>	-	save money for library
<u>7</u>	-	other (please describe)

10. Based on experience in your library, what are the advantages of using paraprofessionals at the reference desk?

open-ended

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11. Based on experience in your library, what are the disadvantages of using paraprofessionals at the reference desk?

open-ended

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 -----  
 -----  
 -----

12. How satisfied are you with the quality of reference service provided by paraprofessionals? [Circle one]

- a. very satisfied  
 b. satisfied  
 c. dissatisfied  
 d. very dissatisfied  
 e. other (please describe)

-----  
 -----  
 -----

13. What is your best estimate of the average number of questions per hour handled at the reference desk during peak demand times?

Low = 2  
Mean= 23  
High = 50

14. Estimate the size of the collection in your reference unit (in terms of number of volumes held).

Low = 150  
Mean= 6,830  
High= 50,000

15. Please indicate the hours your library is open to the public each day by filling in the columns on the left. Indicate the hours the reference desk provides service to the public by filling in the columns on the right.

<u>Library Hours</u>				<u>Reference Desk</u>			
<u>Hours</u>							
Mon	_____	am to	_____ pm	_____	am to	_____	pm
Tue	_____	am to	_____ pm	_____	am to	_____	pm
Wed	_____	am to	_____ pm	_____	am to	_____	pm
Thu	_____	am to	_____ pm	_____	am to	_____	pm
Fri	_____	am to	_____ pm	_____	am to	_____	pm
Sat	_____	am to	_____ pm	_____	am to	_____	pm
Sun	_____	am to	_____ pm	_____	am to	_____	pm

Low for week= 40  
Mean= 60.8  
High= 73

no difference between library and reference desk hours

*Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this survey. Please fold it along dotted lines, staple, and return it by October 10.*

-----Fold Line-----

-----Fold Line-----

return  
stamp

**PUBLIC LIBRARY REFERENCE SURVEY**

Grace Franklin  
2685 Berwyn Road  
Columbus, OH 43221

staple here